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ABSTRACT

In this paper some comparisons are made between the British Primary School system and the American school system. For example, the role of the British headmaster/mistress is considerably more powerful than the role of the American principal in areas concerning curriculum content, school personnel, use of auxiliary personnel, scheduling of classwork time, and daily activities. The British teacher's role--less participatory than in the United States--seems defined as a balance between providing ideas and facilitating independent work to reinforce direct teaching. British primary teachers, however, are now organizing to change some of the traditional power base. Curriculum content seems less structured and sequential; the teaching day is not as rigidly scheduled; and most schools do not appear equipped physically or intellectually to respond to total student choice of curriculum. Other differences from U.S. schools were observed in teacher tenure and retraining, student use of time, and organization of recesses. However, integration of the content areas does seem more prevalent than do interdisciplinary studies in the U.S. It is a myth that the British primary school system is an answer to American educational problems. Cultural differences make it impossible to superimpose British designs on American schools. This report concludes with references and an appendix containing reports by headmasters of three British schools. (Author/SH)

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Some Observation on the Strengths and Weakness of the British Primary Schools

by

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Project for Workshops - Studying Informal Education in the British Setting - England, Summer, 1974
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British Open: The Curriculum and Philosophy

The role of the Headmaster/mistress as the power force behind curriculum content is considerably more powerful than most principals in the "American" school systems.

The role of the classroom teacher relative to curriculum development is much less participatory within the British system than in the "American" system.

Teachers seem less interested in assuming responsibility for defining curriculum content and for requesting teaching materials to teach with. In the United States teachers demand and are encouraged to participate in the decision making processes.

Units or topics of study frequently provide the basic structure for total school happening. These topics may be carried on for a long period such as a term and everyone will participate in the topic. Frequently the shoice of study topic rests with the Head. Two examples of whole school projects are:
1) "Fire" at Sir John Offley School in Madeley and 2) Indians at Bellfield Junior School in Birmingham. It appears these whole school projects are more often undertaken in the British systems than in the "American" systems.

Defining curriculum content appears more relaxed - less structured and less sequential than in the United States. A syllabus outlining, detailed skill sequence for teaching a content area seems less available than in the United States.

The lack of continuity between and among the local school authorities and schools within each authority looms as a threat to the future of education with the influx of immigrants. Becoming assimilated and acculturated is difficult within a consistent school system, and the problems must be compounded by an inconsistent system.

Intrgrated day organization of curriculum requires self-disciplined students and dynamic resource centers offering sutdents a wide continuum for working at their own pace on their own topic of interest. However, most schools do not appear equipped either physically or intellectually to really respond to total student choice of curriculum.

The teacher's role generally seems defined as a balance between ideas and facilitating independent work to reinforce the direct teaching. Teacher response to student work seemed absent on many occassions. occassions.

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English educators commented several times that "American" children are well prepared to do academic work when they come to England and they were pleased with the "American" educational systems. (A super reward for the "American " Educators.
they were
The position of God-sub-one (God') held by the Headmasters/mistresses of schools within Britain is far above any professional educator in America.

The submissive role of teachers is, in some measure, a function of the public position of the Heads.

Presently teachers in Britain are becoming more unionized and gaining strength in terms of changing some of the traditional power base.

The continuum of teacher competency is as broad in Britain as it is in the United States. Interestingly there are two significant factors working in this system:

-Teachers are hired virtually for life and freedom to move from one school to another is much more available.

In service education, post graduate course work and/or any other form of teacher retraining or revitalizing is not required here. Teachers may take courses because they are interested but there is no monetary incentive for doing so.

These two factors seem less desirable than the retreading processes and the right for a schooldistrict to get rid of a poor teacher.

School personnel hassle many of the same issues hassled with in the United States. In reading, for example, which reading methodology is the best is discussed, discussed and rediscussed on both sides of the Atlantic. In math both countries are questioning modern verses traditional math and how to best teach the metric system.

Interaction of school personnel with parents is considerably less frequent than in the United States. If a discipline or an academic problem arises, the Head is most likely to see the parent and intercide for the teacher. Several questions about the relationship between teacher and parent, teacher and child or -parent-teacher-and Head arise.

General interaction with parents is considerably less frequent here. Annually Parent Night is held once, generally in the spring. At this event parents are scheduled for a five minute conference with their child's teacher. This is the only scheduled report to parents about the child's progress throughout the year. In the United States our interaction is much more frequent and perhaps more meaningful in terms of developing ties with the family. Earlier and more frequent interaction with the family provides insight into the most effective methods for dealing with the child and its parents.

Reporting academic progress to parents is not as important in British education as it is in American education. This is one of the few instances in which British educators feel American educators worry too much about home environment and meeting society's needs.

Use of auxillary personnel such as remedial reading teachers, psychologists, and social workers is dependent upon requests for such people by the Head. Information gathered by these people is then fed to the Head who then contacts the teacher involved. In using these services at the American schools, teachers are the primary contact. Principals generally become involved only in serve situations.

The single most significant discovery concerning personnel is the strength of the role of the Headmaster/mistress. These people know their staff well, know the students well, and generally have much more knowledge about happening of the school than your average American principal. In the other side of this issue is the fact that often these people become very highly paid (compared to classroom teachers) file clerks and secretaries. In some instances the Heads do the phoning for field trips and make all the decisions about curriculum and scheduling of daily events. This is an interesting problem for the modern Head of any level of school.

The integrated day plan for learning is not as conspicuously present as has been the general report. In many instances educators explain that theoretically the idea is sound but in reality the situation is difficult to manage and thus frightening to many teachers. The same can be aid for American response to the ideasof an integrated day.

Scheduling of classwork time is generally in longer time sigments than is often seen in the United States. Once of the reasons for extending working time is because more integration of content areas. For example, social studies and maths may be joined for a cooking experience.

British educators are integrating what Americans term "language arts" for more productive and relevant work. In Britain this group of subjects is termed"English" and includes spelling,handwriting, creative writing, language structure or grammar, speec, poetry, and reading. Generally these are interrelated for direct teaching and for independent reinforcement. In the United States a controversy continues about which methodology is best for the most productive student outcome. Segregating these areas produces a synthetic teaching/ learning situation.

The role of the Head is dominant again regarding the scheduling of classes and the rescheduling of classes for special cases.

Students, in the primary and junior schools appear to waste less time in getting into class and getting settled into their task-with and without teacher supervision this was a frequent occurance. In the American schools much time is wasted annually when classes move about and when work begins.

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An interesting and noteworthy occurance within most infant and junior schools is a whole school/common recess time. While the children go to play, the teachers go to tea. The recess duty is rotated on si designated basis. This is a time of group interaction and relaxation. This is a significant improvement over American educators planning periods.

Use of class time for direct teaching appears less prevalent than in the United States, However, this fmaybe due to the time of the year in which the observations were made.

The teaching day is not rigidly scheduled from eight until four as it frequently is in America. For example, over-night, two-day, and week-long outings are not uncommon. Teachers seem to enjoy these opportunities to get to know the students outside the school setting.

Outings and field trips are an example of the ease with which the classroom is expanded into the "real" world. The use of school grounds for gardening is one of the interesting ways the Head promotes total involvement with the school community. Too often in the United States the "real" world experiences are considered non-educational.

Field trip experiences seem to be very well planned and preand post teaching occurs: In the United States sometimes field trips are used strictly as a means of getting out of class.

The use of furniture within the classroom was consistently more traditional than had been anticipated: There were alot of rows of desks and tables all arranged very neatly straight. Book shelves and other furniture was less flexible than alot of things available in the United States.

Children did not move about as freely as had been anticipated. However, one explanation for this is the age and the accoustics of many of the buildings. When the children began to move about, the noise level rose sharply. With much movement in some classes, it could be impossible to maintain quiet work activities.

According to frequent reporting by American educators, the majority of the British infant and junior schools are open plan and it was really interesting to note how few are open and fewer still the real theoretical open plan in action. Dr. Shipman of the Inner London Education Authority. made a cogent comment when he remarked that many professed open plan schools are really self-contained classes without walls. In the Cherry Creek Colorado system, for example, many of the "open" plans are more rigid than many "Traditional" self-contained classrooms.

A myth of American educators is that the British primary school system is THE educational answer to American educational problems. The cultural differences make it impossible to superimpose British designs on American plants.

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PARKFIELD PRIMARY SCHOOLS

WOLVERHAMPTON.

HEADMASTER-C.R. HODKINSON.

This school was built and opened in 1913. In 1960 it was rebuilt and extended to operate as a Primary School with Junior and Infant departments.

In 1973 a nursery was affiliated to the school.

The present Head took charge in 1961 and my first major problems were posed by a steady influx of Asian and Westerndian immigrants children. These problems being wide ranging and very different as between the two groups.

In the process of coping, novel teaching methods were devised and the whole exercise proved stimulating and frustrating by turns.

Over the next four years there was a great and real danger of our being swamped by lthesespeople, as the indigenous population took fright and fled!

However, the position was stabilised by some very arbitary decision making and the school now operates on a roughly 50/50 basis, coloured/white children.

Without going into a treatise on "Aims" it would seem necessary to state that there has had to be a major revision since the immigrant invasions, and social aims are now equally as important as intellectual ones if we are to avoid confrontation in our streets in 10 years time.

Although the school was not designed for "open" education I do not see this as a drawbook when considering modern, child centred approaches. The openness needs to be in the teachers' minds. For several years we have been working towards open, team teaching methods, and in true English style we are evolving into something which was not contemplated 14 years ago.

Now we have an admixture of what has been proved best in the past, and what is proving to be good at the present. In some respects we are very old fashioned, in that we set great store by certain values of behaviour, manners, and the worth of pride in achievement et. On the other hand I get great store

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by the child's undeniable right to happiness and self expression.

The school is presently organized in sight classes: 3 infants, 5 juniors including a rememdial class. There are 14 members of staff including myself, giving a pupil teacher ratio of some 29 : 1 overall.

TANHOUSE SCHOOL
GREAT BARR, SANDWELL
HEADMASTER - JACK SMALLMAN

The school is situated in pleasant surroundings, overlooking fields and woods to a sloping horizon. It was opened in 1970, one hundred years after the Education Act. The Infant Department is run on the open plan with three areas. The Junior Department has four areas, with a glass "wall" opening onto a large central resource area. There is also a playing field. There are 48 square feet of teaching space per head. Plenty of power plugs are provided and T.V. and Radio points are everywhere. There is a large hall, and mobile PE equipment which all fold back into the wall. Wall to wall carpeting is in all teaching areas. There are 280 pupils, from 5 yrs. to 11 yrs. Other features are an aquarium and an aviary.

Following are some of the audio-visual equipment and teaching devices used at the school: sound projector; various film strip projectors; record player; cassette and reel tape recorders; syncrofax audio page playback machine; Peabody Language Lab - both Nursery and Infant Levels; Countdown mattes scheme; Stotts programmer reading kit; Bell & Howell Language Master and all the Keyboard Reading Kit; Breakthrough to Literacy; and Remediative Compensatory Kit.

The Junior Department has 5 staff members in two teams, with the Deputy Head as leader of each to coordinate work generally. There are 160 children. Vetical streaming has "occured" in the lower junior team. Work is individually based on ability and aptitudes; group work, etc. as appropriate. Topic work projects sometimes involve the two teams, or , indeed, the whole department. There is a central resource area with a considerable amount of mattes and Science & English resources and aids.

The Infant Department has 4 full time and 2 part time staff members, with 120 children. Team teaching is used. There is a central resource area with A.V. aids in plenty, and loads of supplementary and graded work. The reading schemes are based on Keyword, with the book box scheme; plenty of pre-reading activities. Records of progress are kept. Educational Prudence programme is followed with, of course, second year survey.

Outside activities include: discotheque groups; recorder groups; choir; swimming; football, netball and rounder teams; camping in Forect of Scan.

Visitors come from all over the world (including Dr. Edith King): Post-Grad students, etc. from Birmingham University; Researchers from Keele University who are investigating children who show restless, inattentive behaviour, as well as aggressive behavior, in and out of the classroom, by looking at the relationships between EEG and autonomic nervous sytems activity in various groups & ages; students from colleges of education or T/P; and also those just observing

Parents come into assembly one morning per month. There are Christmass Concerts and Carol Service, Easter Festivals, and Harvest, proceeds of which are giving to O.A.P.S. We support John Dando House next door, when we give a pecial service and Christmas tea, serve by the children and provided by the cook. There are open days, when parents can see the children at work, and open evenings when parents talk to the teachers. Additionally, there are coffee evenings and "bring & buy" sales.

We are asked to take Spina bifida and semi-spastic children, to give them a normal school life for the time being.

I do a tremendous amount of social work; distributing 350 Christmas parcels to children all over the Borough; father confessor to mothers and fathers in trouble; broken homes; arguments between parents. My shoulder is always available to cry on, and I make myself available just to listen to people's problems.- help to find housing, staving off eviction - you name it, we do it. Apart from trying to educate, the school is a place where anyone can come for advice or help at anytime.

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ALCOTT HALL PRIMARY SCHOOL.

Chalmsley Wood is a large housing estate on the edge of the City of Birmingham. It's inhabitants have moved into the area from demolished property in Birmingham as a result of a slum clearance program in the central parts of Birmingham and older council owned estates in other Birmingham suburbs. All the dwellings in which these families live are owned by the local authority and let to rent. In addition to these, however, a small number of femilies are living in owner/occupier property.

The estate is divided into fifteen areas, each bounded by main through roads and planned as a unit. The majority of these are provided with a Primary School and five Comprehensive Schools serve the area. Alcott school originally designed for 480 children, between the ages of five and eleven, now caters for 554, by means of the additionaof four mobile classrooms, erected on the periphery of the playing fields. Built around a central garden area, the school is designed in the form of rectangle. Two sides are built to a full open-plan design for Junior children. In addition to this there is a closed room for Music, administration centre, closed hall used for assemblies, Physical Education and School Meals, two playgrounds and a large playing field. The school is divided into four Department,i.e. The Lower and Upper Infants, and the Lower and Upper Juniors, each with it's own Head of Department.

The school has problems common with other schools in the area. There is a large turn over of staff, due to the preponderance of probationary teachers, who move away for further experience and young woman teachers, who marry and eventually leave due to pregnancy.

A lot of the children attending the school, lack a secure home background with consequent inadequancies of self discipline and often the majority of the cost of living, as in many other area, both parents of the majority of families in Chalmsley Wood are engaged in full-time employment. A great many mothers work an evening shift at local factories thus depriving the child of the mother,child contact, immediately after school hours. We are still unalbe to cater for three year period in the Infant Department for all children. This, however, is improving and it is hoped shortly to admit all reception children in a September intake.. We still have children in the Junior Department, who started their school life in other schools.

The Infant Department works in an open plan situation with teaching areas defined by screens. The Junior children work mainly in their own rooms, which are enclosed on three sides only. We feel that some sort of security of a defined area in which to work and a close personal relationship with a member of staff is necessary for many of these children.

Whilst providing many opportunities for free expression in the Arts we see our main purpose as providing the General Knowledge and experience the children lack from outside sources and all important skill of literacy. We use "Maths" for Schools ' by Fletcher as our main number basis and "Through the Rainbow" and 'Ladybird' as our main reading Schemes.

R. Dunford (Headmaster)